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CITY TYPE

The Boston Globe

Peeking over the shoulder of a poet at work

By Ellen Steinbaum, Globe Correspondent | August 27, 2006

Everyone knows what a writer at work looks like. We've seen it in all those movies; in fact it's playing a supporting role right now in the charming "Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont." The writer sits at the typewriter (yes it's almost always a typewriter, unless it's a period piece, and then it's a quill pen) ekes out a word or two, rips out the paper in an arcing motion (unless it's the quill pen scenario), crumples it, and tosses it onto the floor.

That's writing. Or not.

There is a fascination with watching writers work, though the level of action can rival paint drying. A lot of thinking while looking inert is involved. Of all writers, it is poets whose work process can seem most inscrutable. So I was interested to hear about a new website, QuickMuse.com, that challenges two poets in a head-to-head matchup to write a poem in 15 minutes and to allow readers to see each keystroke as they work.

It's a concept I discussed recently with Joyce Peseroff, a poet whose luminous poems suggest careful writing and thoughtful revising. Peseroff is the author of four collections, including her newest, "Eastern Mountain Time," and the editor of three books, including "Simply Lasting: Writers on Jane Kenyon." She teaches creative writing at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, where she will be part of a new master of fine arts program in fiction writing and poetry.

"For the reader, it's always fun to be present at the creation," Peseroff says of the Quick Muse challenge. "For the poet, it's almost as if you're an experimental subject and everybody gets to watch the process. They get to see how much you revise, whether you write the whole thing and then go back. Readers get a sense of how a writer most typically proceeds — what's the first thing the writer does in response to a prompt. But it's always a draft."

As a teacher, Peseroff feels that it can be important for students to watch the process unfold. False starts and lame detours, reworked images and sharpened words can show them that a poem rarely pours itself onto the page in ready-for-primetime condition. Still, she feels that opening her own process to observation would be intimidating and might even hinder her writing. Her poems begin in everyday things.

Right now she's thinking about a rooster at her vacation home in Maine that may strut his way into a poem.

"I try to keep alert for images, sounds, rhythms, something that feels like it has potential," she says. "It has to have some kind of emotional engagement for me, something that brings a lump to the throat."

She composes her own poems right on the computer ("I want to see how it's going to look"), saving a file for each new version.

"Even when initial drafts come fairly quickly, the search for the right word may take weeks," she says, noting that one personal preference is that, unless it's intentional, she hates repeating a word in a poem. Once she has a fairly solid draft, the next part of the process is meeting with two poet friends for discussion of their works in progress.

"Three or four people is best," she says, for group critiquing. "With more, you can get overwhelmed with comments and suggestions. You have to be able to trust the people you're working with. I tell my students you should bring work that is something you want to change, rather than something you consider finished. For me, the workshop members are my 'ideal readers.'"

Contact Ellen Steinbaum at citytype@globe.com. Past columns are at www.ellensteinbaum.com.

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